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Surviving or thriving?

Enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in their organisational settings

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Abstract:

Summary: High rates of absence due to stress, and issues with recruitment and retention of staff suggest that social work is a challenging profession. Despite this, many social workers gain a great deal of satisfaction from their role. Various studies have focused on stress management in social work. Less attention has been paid to how social workers maintain resilience in the face of challenges and thrive in their role. Drawing on a social constructionist approach to explore how social workers conceptualise emotional resilience in the context of their profession, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 social workers employed in local authority teams.

Findings: The findings highlight how emotional resilience tended to be associated with stress management by the social workers interviewed. Organisational and structural factors were felt to threaten resilience more than the emotional intensity of working with service-users.

Application: When resilience is conceptualised as stress management, sources of adversity need to be addressed to enable social workers to survive. Resilience needs to be reconceptualised as positive adaptation to the challenges of the social work role in order to promote factors that enable workers to thrive. The insights from the study exhort us to re-examine the scope of social work organisations to enhance the resilience of their workers.

Introduction

The high level of stress and burn-out among social workers is well-documented (Coffey, Dugdill & Tattersall, 2004; Collins, 2008; Coyle, Edwards, Hannigan, Fothergill & Burnard, 2005; Kinman & Grant, 2011; Van Heugten, 2011). Retention rates for staff are poor and the average amount of time a social worker remains in their profession is 8 years compared to 15 years for nurses and 25 for doctors (Curtis, Moriarty & Netten, 2010). This presents a rather bleak picture but in 2003 social work was among the top twenty jobs in the UK that provided the highest levels of satisfaction (Rose, 2003). Many social workers maintain a sense of wellbeing (Collins, 2008) and have positive feelings about making a difference to people's lives (Collins, 2007; Wendt, Tuckey & Prosser, 2011).

While it is important to address factors that lead to stress and burn-out in order to improve the wellbeing of social workers, this perspective is based on a deficit model (Carson, King & Papatraianou, 2011). Shifting the focus to a consideration of the resilience of social workers lends itself to a "strengths and solutions-oriented" focus (McAllister & McKinnon, 2009, p.377) that draws attention to the factors that enable social workers to thrive rather than just survive (Wendt et al., 2011). This is not to say that the world of social work should be tinged with a rosy glow. In all areas of life "downs as well as ups spice life but need to be in balance" (Goleman, 1995, p.57).

The Emotionally Resilient Person

Resilience was once thought to be a quality of 'rare and exceptionally healthy individuals' (Bonanno, 2004, p.20) but is now considered to be commonplace (Bonanno, 2004; Masten, 2001). But is resilience an innate personality trait, a skill, an attitude, or a combination of all of these? Certain characteristics have been associated with resilient people. Grant and Kinman (2013) suggest it has a multi-faceted nature and link it to a range of personal skills, attributes and attitudes. In terms of skills, they suggest that critical thinking, problem-solving and planning are integral to resilience. Social skills are important in enabling resilient people to develop supportive relationships, as is the ability to draw on resources and use coping strategies. They propose that people who have high levels of self-awareness and attitudes of enthusiasm, optimism and hope are more resilient, as well as those who are open to new experiences and have a high level of autonomy. In the face of challenging experiences,

resilience is associated with finding a sense of purpose and learning from these experiences, persisting through them and recovering quickly. The resilient person can understand their limitations, look to the future with positivity and adapt to changes in circumstances caused by difficult life events. Perspectives such as a clear self-identity, high self-esteem, humour and a positive self-concept are seen as contributing towards resilience.

Most definitions of resilience involve the concept of “adversity” as the antecedent and “positive adaptation” as the consequence (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013, p.13). Resilient people use positive emotions to deal with negative emotional experiences. These positive emotions promote flexibility, creativity and open mindedness, and help people develop social, intellectual and physical resources which further increase their resilience (Tugade & Frederickson, 2004). This last point seems to suggest that resilience is not dichotomous, but exists in degrees with the possibility of exponential growth; the more resilient a person is, the more resilient they can become.

The relationship between resilience and coping is a matter of debate. Collins (2008) refers to the ideas of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who suggest that coping is intrinsically related to resilience. They make a distinction between “problem-focused coping”, which aims to address the source of stress and “emotion-focused coping”, which manages the emotions arising from the stressor. Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989) propose that strategies of emotion-focused coping, such as sympathy from others, should be used in the short-term to lead to problem-focused coping including advice and practical assistance. They warn that focusing exclusively on the emotional element of a situation may impede action taken to find a resolution. In contrast, Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) see resilience and coping as distinct in the sense that resilience is an attitude of positive appraisal, and coping is a particular strategy. They argue that resilience inherently entails positivity whereas coping strategies, such as substance misuse, can have negative outcomes. This is an interesting distinction however, if resilience and coping are separated, resilience may be seen as a passive concept reliant on adopting a positive perspective. This detracts from a dynamic conceptualisation that empowers the individual to challenge aspects of their situation, and to build on their resilience through the use of coping strategies.

There is some complexity, too, in the relationship between resilience and recovery. Various researchers conceptualise resilience as ‘bouncing back’ (e.g. Grant & Kinman, 2013; Rajan-Rankin, 2014), implying that stable functioning is temporarily lost before being regained.

There is an acknowledgement that resilient individuals feel negative emotions in response to adversity but may recover from them more quickly or more completely (Tugade & Frederickson, 2004). Howe (2008) maintains that resilience is not just 'the possession of a robust temperament' (p.107) and no-one has "across-the-board resilience" (p.106). Resilience fluctuates and will not flourish if multiple stressors are present (Padesky & Mooney, 2012). In contrast, Bonanno (2004) explicitly excludes recovery from his definition of resilience, which he sees as the ability to maintain rather than restore stable functioning. These contrasting characterisations of resilience have implications for the ways in which it is supported and enhanced. If recovery is seen as an aspect of resilience, it follows that external conditions need to be favourable for this process of personal recovery to occur. In contrast, if resilience is about maintaining stability, the focus is more on the individual's capacity to ride the waves of adversity.

The Emotionally Resilient Social Worker

While all individuals draw on resilience to cope with life's adversities, social workers have specific challenges in relation to their role. Social work involves "emotional work of a high order" (Howe, 2008, p.1) and empathy is a trait that is expected of social workers as they navigate this emotional landscape. Empathy entails a sense of self separate from others, the capacity to understand the emotions of others, and the ability to regulate one's own emotions. It is necessary both to the social work role and to resilience but only if the social worker has the ability to "turn off" their empathetic concern rather than become over-involved (Gerdes & Segal, 2011, p.146). Over-empathising undermines resilience by causing "empathetic personal distress" (Kinman & Grant, 2011, p.265), which can lead to vicarious trauma in which social workers experience personal feelings of trauma through the situations of service-users (Grant and Kinman, 2013). Some participants in Rajan-Rankin's study (2014) distanced themselves from the source of potential distress for self-protection. This was a small study of 10 participants using semi-structured interviews but is useful in highlighting how empathetic separation of oneself from others can be considered necessary for emotional survival.

From the discussion above it seems that an elusive set of emotional boundaries and careful self-management are required in order for social workers to sustain resilience. Hochschild's work on the emotional labour of flight attendants is applicable to the social work role.

Emotional labour refers to the requirement of employees to express particular emotions appropriate to their role and tasks, leading to “emotive dissonance” (1983, p.90) when displays of emotion according to the rules are different to the emotion actually experienced. This can lead to various consequences; burnout from over-identification with the work, guilt about under-identification, and detachment leading to cynicism and demotivation. In the context of emotion management, Rajan-Rankin’s study (2014) highlighted that the expression of certain emotions was seen as unprofessional, and that emotions were contained until it was deemed appropriate to express them. The participants thought that resilience developed through awareness of these managed emotions. Grant and Kinman’s much larger study (2013) of 200 social work students and 100 social workers also associated emotion management with resilience. In contrast, a study in Denmark found that social workers were emotionally exhausted and experienced feelings of self-alienation as a result of emotion management (Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015).

This is a complex situation for social workers. Empathy is a key social work skill however over-empathising risks personal distress and under-empathising can give rise to negative emotions such as guilt and poor motivation. Both are likely to undermine resilience. Constant emotion management is required to regulate the experience and demonstration of personal feelings and this too can affect resilience. The emotionally resilient social worker has a fine line to tread.

Perhaps the concept of emotional intelligence can offer some solutions to pinpointing this fine line where empathy and resilience coalesce.

“People who are poor in this ability are constantly battling feelings of distress, while those who excel in it can bounce back far more quickly from life's setbacks and upsets.”
(Goleman, 1995, p. 43).

While Goleman was not writing about resilience specifically, it is interesting that the language he uses, the ability to ‘bounce back’, bears similarities to the conceptualisations of resilience that have so far been presented in this study. Goleman (1995) associates emotional intelligence with self-awareness, recognition of feelings, appropriate expression of emotions, understanding and management of emotions in oneself and others, reflective ability and regulation of mood. These factors are directly relevant to the issues of empathy discussed in the previous section and may enable social workers to avoid becoming emotionally detached or risking distress through over-identification.

The Emotionally Resilient Organisation

Much of the recent literature has moved away from ideas of static resilient personality types, towards a notion of resilience as a dynamic relationship between the individual and the social context (Adamson, Beddoe & Davys, 2014; Beddoe, Davys & Adamson, 2013; Grant and Kinman, 2013; Rajan-Rankin, 2014; Ungar, 2008). While there may be certain traits, skills and attitudes associated with resilience, these are mediated by the environment in which they occur. In this study, the authors' interest is in how the culture of social work, and the organisations in which it is practised, may influence workers' understanding and experience of resilience.

Organisations are entities comprised of individuals who experience emotions that shape and are shaped by organisational culture. Within organisations, emotions “are deeply woven into the way roles are enacted and learned, power is exercised, trust is held, commitment formed and decisions made” (Fineman, 2000, p.1). Just as individuals can be emotionally intelligent, so too can organisations (Goleman, 1998).

The culture of “new managerialism” that has evolved in social work (Collins, 2008, p.1181), reflects aspects of Goleman's (1998) description of an organisation that fails to demonstrate emotional intelligence, specifically in terms of value conflicts and work overload. Some social workers find the managerial culture challenging to their value base with its focus on efficiency and best value at the expense of emotion and relationship building (Collins, 2007). Resilience requires an integration of personal and organisational values and when these are in conflict, disillusionment may occur which undermines resilience (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Resilience is further affected by work overload and pressure on workers to meet targets (Collins, 2008). Despite these pressures, or indeed because of them, some social workers were found to be unwilling to use counselling and support services for fear of being considered ineffective (Van Heugten, 2011). If organisational culture promotes efficiency and inhibits social workers being honest about their emotions, they are at greater risk of decreased resilience and burnout (Taylor, 2016).

Positive appraisal of situations is considered to be characteristic of resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013) but caution must be exercised in encouraging a passive acceptance of environmental conditions. Optimism must be imbued with a sense of realism and “we should

not underestimate the suffering endured by overworked social workers and users besieged and burdened with the limitations of low incomes, poor agency resources and structural oppression” (Collins, 2007, p.264). There are various structural pressures placed on social workers in addition to those mentioned by Collins. Bureaucratic processes, role ambiguity, lack of recognition and reward, limited promotion opportunities, lack of supervision, lack of support, and poor relationships between management and staff were all found to undermine wellbeing (Coffey et al., 2004).

An emotionally intelligent social worker demonstrates awareness of the emotions of others. Similarly, an organisation should recognise the impact of emotional demands on its workers (Goleman, 1995). In social work, one forum for this is supervision. Social work supervision typically entails three elements; education, administration and support (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Research has shown that supervision within the new managerial culture tends to emphasise the administrative function with a focus on budgets, efficiency and accountability (Collins, 2008; Kinman & Grant, 2011; Rogers, 2001) however it is the function of emotional support that is considered to be most significant for enhancing resilience (Collins, 2008; McAllister & McKinnon, 2009; Rajan-Rankin, 2014). As supervision is closely aligned with line management and accountability, the power dimensions of the supervisory relationship need to be explicitly addressed in order to build trust (Beddoe, 2012). Peer supervision can provide a less formal and more accessible way to support social workers and is associated with enhanced emotional resilience (McAllister & McKinnon, 2009).

The preceding discussion has explored the characteristics of emotionally resilient people and social workers in particular and embedded this concept into the culture and practices of social work organisations. In order to establish how resilience may be enhanced it is important to analyse this interplay of individual and socially constructed resilience, and to understand how it affects the experiences of social workers in their day to day working lives.

Methodology

In this article, the authors use a social constructionist approach to explore the lived experiences of social workers’ resilience and examine the ways in which it can be enhanced

in the organisational setting. This approach can best inform implications for practice, as the conceptions of resilience arise from within the profession itself.

Semi-structured interviews were held with 13 social workers from several different teams within one local authority in Scotland. Participants were questioned about their general understanding of the concept of resilience in relation to the social work role, if and why they thought social workers needed to be resilient and how they developed and sustained their personal resilience. In order to explore the impact of the professional context, they were asked their opinions and experiences regarding the role of their team and organisation in supporting them to be resilient. The participants were not provided with a definition of resilience so that, in line with a social constructionist approach, their responses would provide data about how resilience is understood and experienced specifically within the culture of social work.

The participants included nine female and four male social workers. All were white British except one who was white European. Two of the participants were in their first year of qualified social work practice. Three had been practising for over fifteen years and the remainder had between 2 and 10 years experience. The authors used 'generic purposive sampling' (Bryman, 2012) to select participants. This was necessary as the study concerned the resilience of a particular workforce, and aimed to explore a concept in depth rather than produce results that could be generalised to a wider population. Participation in the research was voluntary.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The authors used a process of thematic analysis by coding segments of data (Ezzy, 2002). A process of open coding was carried out through line by line reading of the data to label it into categories. Selective coding was then undertaken to focus on the themes identified, aiming to understand them conceptually before linking them to existing theory (Goodman, 2001). The predominant themes to emerge were conceptualisations of resilience primarily as related to coping with and 'bouncing back' from stress, the complex relationship between empathy and emotion management in dealing with the emotional demands of the role, the pressures arising from organisational processes, and the capacity to learn and develop resilience. These themes will be explored in the following section.

Formal ethical approval was obtained from the University's Ethics Committee prior to beginning this study. An information sheet was provided to prospective participants and informed consent obtained in writing prior to the interviews. Participants were made aware that data would be anonymised and pseudonyms used to protect their identity. This topic had the potential to be sensitive as it concerned the emotional experience of a demanding professional role. The authors made participants aware of the independent counselling service provided by their local authority and clarified that they could choose to terminate the interview at any point.

Findings

The participants spoke about a range of personal, role-related and organisational factors in response to questions about their understanding and experience of resilience. While individual attributes and skills were seen as important, one of the main themes to emerge was the inherent stress in the social work role and the tendency for organisational factors to add to this stress rather than provide support to alleviate it. Support was seen as crucial to manage the emotional intensity of the role and sustain empathetic regard.

Coping with Stress

The participants generally framed resilience as coping with stress. Although the concept of stress did not appear in the title of this research nor in any of the interview questions, the word 'stress' and its variants were mentioned a total of 120 times across all of the 13 interviews. For example, in response to a question on what the term 'emotional resilience' meant in relation to the role of a social worker, Ben said that resilience is "how we manage our day to day stress and anxieties that crop up on a daily basis in our job and also it's kind of how we manage that, how we cope with that". Linda echoed this in stating that, in her view, resilience is:

"Probably just an ability to actually keep your head above water and sort of manage your case load and all the stresses that come from that".

Linda

The ability to keep one's head above water is very much a reference to survival, implying the avoidance of drowning under the weight of demands. Yet there was an implicit acceptance of inherent stress in the culture of social work. As Will pondered, it is "what I signed up for".

This culture of stress within social work was referred to on numerous occasions by most of the participants. Jo spoke about a “stress competition” in which social workers sought to legitimise their own stress by seeing the pressures of their workload as more intense than that of fellow workers. Alex had formed a slightly different view of this culture in her observations of colleagues sharing feelings of stress in an “effort to be part of the collective, that then causes people to oversee or overestimate their stress”. In terms of sickness absence due to stress, Sally thought that this had become part of the reality of social work and commented that managers’ response to stress was “you’re either functional or you’re not”.

Personal coping strategies were mentioned by participants such as adequate sleep, listening to music, exercise, yoga and mindfulness. Sally and Scarlett referred to the use of negative coping strategies among colleagues such as alcohol use and over eating which they both recognised as not contributing to resilience in a sustainable way.

Bouncing Back

The term “bouncing back” was used by three participants. This seems to be a more positive conceptualisation than coping with stress as it entails returning to a healthy emotional state after dealing with difficult situations. In relation to working with service users, Jill said,

“You can really feel their emotions and it’s about being able to, when you come away from that situation, it’s to get back to your own personal emotional state rather than what was the person’s emotional state that you were just with”.

Jill

She referred to a “resilience spectrum” indicating that she feels she loses resilience during challenging situations and restores it again after the event. In line with the debate in resilience literature, other participants thought that resilience was more about maintaining stability rather than restoring healthy functioning that may have temporarily been lost.

Emotion Management

All of the participants referred to the emotional demands of working with service users who are often in situations of trauma and distress. Like the flight attendants in Hochschild’s study (1983) and the social workers whom Grant and Kinman (2013) interviewed, most of the participants referred to the need to be resilient to manage the emotional content of their role and said that they regularly managed their emotions in their day to day work. Karen described putting on a “façade” to cover up the negative emotions she experienced but

pointed out that this cannot be sustained indefinitely and that she has in the past “just completely crashed” as a result. Ben and Scarlett both used the analogy of being a duck or swan with a calm presence above water and an unseen agitation beneath the surface as they tried to stay afloat. Most of the participants considered emotion management to negatively affect resilience. Jo thought that ultimately it was unhealthy particularly when there is little opportunity within the working day to reflect and process the emotion.

Empathy

The participants in this study generally saw empathy as highly necessary to the social work role but a potential threat to resilience. In order to maintain resilience, some of the participants established empathetic boundaries to avoid being negatively affected by intense emotions. Alice thought that objectivity was important both for her emotional wellbeing and the impact this had on how effectively she could support service users. Reflecting on ways to manage empathy, Will referred to the “tricky balance” between empathy and self-protection and said:

“To be able to do your job well, I think you need to be emotionally involved and empathetic but to be able to do it for any length of time you have to be able to switch off”.

Will

The positioning of empathic boundaries was complex for the participants. Some associated boundaries with resilience and professionalism. For instance, to a question on the balance between being emotionally resilient and empathetic, Jill mused that: “yeah but it’s that professional line. If you weren’t professional then you’d probably jump over and give them a big hug and start wailing with them and bring out the tissues but that’s not appropriate, you can’t do that”. Alex’s boundaries appeared more innate:

“There’s no part of me which kind of sits at night time and worries or dwells upon the sadness of some of this stuff. It’s...yeah to me it is very much to do with boundaries.”

Alex

Many of the more experienced social workers felt that they had developed a clear sense of the limitations of their responsibilities which enhanced their resilience but for some, this created an ethical dilemma. Two workers, each with over ten years’ experience, commented that in order to remain resilient they had to minimise their empathy but were concerned that the boundaries they sought to maintain had resulted in an unprofessional level of detachment. Liz said:

“I do think I don't care as much as I used to. It's like water off a duck's back. Is it that I'm being resilient or just being a jaded social worker who's maybe, shouldn't be doing their job like that?”

Liz

This level of emotional detachment may be considered resilient if resilience is about emotional survival but it does not portray a picture of thriving social workers.

Emotional Support

Despite the emotional pressures of the role, job satisfaction was felt by the majority of the participants to come from working with service users. However, there was recognition of the emotional demands and the need for support to process unexpressed emotion. Emotional support from colleagues was seen as invaluable to resilience by all of the participants and Jo felt that peer group supervision would be useful. Four participants mentioned that the current trend for ‘hot desking’ offices, in which workers do not have designated desks, hindered the development of supportive relationships with colleagues and Mike also thought that it inhibited the expression of emotion as the working environment has become much more public.

Supervision was seen as a formal forum for emotional support but the quality of supervision experienced by the participants varied. Jill mentioned that, despite an organisational policy of four weekly supervision, she had only received supervision three times in nine months. Six participants viewed supervision as lacking an element of emotional support, which they felt would enhance resilience by allowing them to express and make sense of their feelings. Instead supervision was experienced as “business-like” with practices such as managers typing notes during supervision. For Scarlett, this caused her to question how engaged her manager was in this process and hindered her desire to share anything of an emotional nature.

Will compared his experience of supervision as a social work student to his current experience in a qualified social work post:

“My supervisor was excellent, really excellent and we went a lot into depth about emotions and there was much more to do with yeah the emotional experience and reflections. That hasn't been a, even a small feature of my supervisions in this role. It's very procedural, very tasked based.”

Will

Both he and Scarlett commented that reflection within supervision was helpful to resilience in providing an opportunity to understand their emotional responses.

Some participants expressed reluctance to ask for emotional support for fear of appearing weak and ineffective. The newly qualified social workers interviewed expressed this more frequently than the experienced workers, stating that they felt pressure to prove themselves as capable and competent at the early stage of their career. Sally, a social worker with 23 years' experience, remarked that the supervisor by whom she had felt most supported was the one who accepted "human frailties". This highlights the way in which resilience can be nurtured by providing a safe space to discuss the emotional impact of the role.

Organisational factors

A clear message to arise from the data was that the majority of the challenges to resilience arose from organisation factors. Many of the participants described feeling that both their identity as social workers and their professional values were challenged by the managerial and consumerist culture of their organisations. For some of the experienced social workers, there had been a notable shift away from a previous emphasis on therapeutic relationships. The interpersonal nature of the role was experienced by participants in conflict with some of the tasks now expected of a social worker. For example, Linda felt that:

"What we're here for is to actually develop relationships but it's very difficult to kind of develop any of these relationships the way things stand when we're all talking about finance all the time".

Linda

Will expressed the same dilemma resulting in feelings of hypocrisy. He illustrated this with an example of emotionally supporting a woman through the decision to arrange a care home placement for her mother and the apparent "contradiction" of then having to question her about funding arrangements.

A further conflict between professional and organisational values was apparent in the implementation of policies and procedures. Describing her role, Liz said that "what you really do is spend huge amounts of time in front of a computer trying to work out the byzantine minutiae of the council and what different policy there is today because they seem to be changing on an hourly basis and if you ask five people what's really happening you'll get ten different answers". Two participants said that they manipulated procedures as these

were felt to be laborious and delayed positive outcomes for service-users. They were aware of potential criticism by managers but prioritised what they saw as being core social work values to enable and empower service-users by providing timely services.

All the participants spoke about heavy workload being a significant cause of reduced resilience. Some attributed heavy workloads to the organisational practice of allocating a set number of service-users to each social worker regardless of the complexity of the case or their existing caseload. This resulted in workers feeling that the reduction of waiting lists was prioritised over their wellbeing or the quality of service provided to the service-user. A further conflict in values was evident in meeting the competing demands of quantity and quality. Alex, Scarlett and Liz spoke about maintaining resilience by means of a realistic sense of what they could achieve. However, for all of the participants except Alex, this in itself was a struggle as expectations placed on them by their organisations were thought to be excessive. Ben felt that “the conveyor belt approach totally flies in the face of everything social work is about” referring to the holistic and personalised service that social work’s core values promote.

Learning Resilience

Some of the participants thought that resilience may partly be innate but all felt that there was also a dynamic quality that enabled it to grow. In response to a question about how he developed resilience, Will responded “I learn as I go” and Mike referred to “your kind of journey as a worker. I think you build on where your strengths are”. Four other participants felt similarly that resilience is a process of development and is enhanced by having successfully coped with difficult life experiences.

In addition to enhancing resilience by repeated experiences of coping with adversity, it is useful to consider whether it can be more formally taught and learned. All the participants of this study thought that resilience could be enhanced in this way. According to the more newly qualified social workers, the subject of emotional resilience is now addressed on some social work degree courses although they felt that it was not given due priority. Ben’s depiction of the attention paid to it on his degree programme was as follows:

“Emotional resilience, we’ve covered that, let’s move onto death and dying then”.

Ben

Resilience was not explicitly addressed in post-qualifying training according to the participants and only two considered this to be useful. Due to the range of definitions of resilience there may be ambiguity about the content of such courses. If resilience continues to be conceptualised as the avoidance of stress, the content may focus on stress management rather than ways to thrive.

Associated learning was identified by some of the participants. For example, Alex thought that her counselling training had helped her to maintain boundaries which enhanced resilience by promoting a balance of professional empathy and attachment. This suggests that a broader approach to resilience training may be useful with recognition that a range of skills, such as empathy, emotional intelligence and reflective ability are likely to enhance resilience.

Discussion and implications for practice

According to Beddoe, “the profession of social work hovers in uncomfortable places, always caught between transformative aspirations and bureaucratic constraints (2010, p.1292). It seems that understandings of resilience also reside in uncomfortable and elusive places; somewhere between empathy and detachment, and between managerial practices and professional values. The key question is whether the balance can be tipped towards aspiration in order to enhance resilience. Can social workers thrive instead of just survive?

There appears to be a precarious balance between empathy and resilience, and ambiguity about how this relates to professionalism. Too much empathy risks personal distress that undermines resilience, and too little empathy can lead to emotional detachment giving rise to feelings of guilt. Both were seen by the participants to threaten professionalism but nonetheless empathy was seen as essential to effectively carrying out the social work role. There may exist an optimum point where resilience is sustained by professional empathy and emotional engagement with service-users while maintaining one’s wellbeing and stability. Knowing when and how to hit the empathetic off switch was not an easy task for the participants. The opportunity for reflection with peers and within supervision was seen as useful for finding the elusive state of equilibrium between empathy and wellbeing. This is supported by Beddoe (2010) who proposes that reflection is a key function of the supervision process. While the concept of reflective practice is complex, it is worth noting that it encourages learning from experience (Knott & Spafford, 2016) as well as making explicit the

thinking behind practice (Askeland & Fook, 2009). In this way, it can perhaps provide a means for social workers to reflect on and manage the delicate balance of empathy and detachment that is pertinent to resilience and contribute towards wellbeing through self-awareness of emotional responses.

Carver et al. (1989) suggest that emotion-focused coping should be used only as a short-term strategy to lead to problem-focused coping. In the emotionally charged world of social work in which empathy is a required skill, emotion-focused coping is likely to be important in its own right. All of the social workers interviewed felt they could cope with emotional demands and the requirement to show empathy, if appropriate support were in place. Both informal and formal peer group discussions were considered an invaluable way to receive emotional support. In addition, these discussions tend to increase “tacit knowledge” (Carson et al., 2011) which clarifies role expectations and increases confidence, both of which can enhance resilience. Similarly, they provide a forum for the resolution of role conflict (Oktay, 1992), which is pertinent to this study considering the pervasive sense of role conflict as a factor that reduced resilience for the participants. To nurture peer relationships, organisations could create conditions in which these relationships are enabled to thrive through formal team building and informal social activities. Indirect and simple factors such as tolerance of a certain amount of informal conversation within working hours, taking lunch breaks away from desks and celebrating colleagues’ birthdays were seen by the participants to add a personal touch to relationships which strengthened resilience and boosted morale.

Formal supervision was identified by the participants as strongly connected to emotional support and resilience, but there were mixed experiences of how it was delivered. Many participants felt that supervision had become business-like and paid little attention to their individual wellbeing. The same issue has been found in other studies on stress and resilience in social work (Beddoe, 2010; Kinman & Grant, 2011; Rogers, 2001). Both the literature and the interview data highlight that some social workers avoided asking for support for fear of appearing weak or incompetent. A culture needs to be created in which self-care is considered “a mark of professionalism, rather than personal failure” (Van Heugten, 2011, p.11).

Supervisors have overall responsibility for accountability and this may cause them to micromanage (Beddoe, 2010). The answer may be to supplement in-house supervision with supervision facilitated by someone external to the organisation, who can provide a more

emotion-focused experience without the power imbalance inherent in the relationship between line manager and employee (Beddoe, 2012). It is important to recognise that “even the most basic of human adaptational systems are not invulnerable and require nurturance” (Masten, 2001, p.235), and for social workers and managers to recognise the pressures of the role and view the willingness to discuss emotions as an aspect of professional responsibility.

What emerged strongly from the data was that the culture and practices of the organisation were perceived as a far greater threat to resilience than the emotional demands of working with service-users, which all the participants felt was the essence of the role and in many cases their motivation for choosing social work as a career. Most participants valued the interpersonal element of the role but felt that this had been eroded by the managerialist and consumerist culture of social work. It follows that Hochschild’s concept of “emotive dissonance” (1983) arising from emotional management was not apparent in the responses of the participants who largely embrace the emotional content of their role as long as they receive adequate support and effectively manage empathetic boundaries. There was, however, an evident “values dissonance” arising from organisational practices which were seen to undermine opportunities to build positive relationships with service users. To a certain extent, the role of social work is defined in law and thus cannot easily be challenged. The Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013 provides a recent example of the social work role moving away from a focus on relationships towards management of budgets and the associated bureaucracy. The opportunity for reflection on one’s professional role and open discussion about feelings of conflict may to some extent align the values of individual workers and those of the organisation that Rajan-Rankin (2014) suggests is crucial to resilience. Empowering workers by involving them in consultations regarding changes in policy and practice would help to foster a sense of control over defining the cultural landscape of the profession. Some participants had been involved in such consultations but felt that this had been tokenistic and that their contributions had neither been valued nor influenced outcomes.

Ethically, the constant allocation of cases was experienced by workers as dehumanising to themselves and service-users. In the Codes of Practice for Social Services Workers (Scottish Social Services Council, 2016) it is specified that service-users should be treated as individuals, contrary to the “conveyer belt” approach to allocation mentioned by some of the participants. Various ways social workers sustained their emotional resilience came into

conflict with expectations of their organisation. Corners were cut by committed social workers trying to achieve positive outcomes for service-users and reduce the negative impact on their own wellbeing. In this situation, the very measures that sustained resilience also had the capacity to undermine it, as they created a further dissonance between individual and organisational values. Hochschild (1983) proposed that the “industry speed up” of airlines led to an increase in the emotional labour of flight attendants. There was less time to deliver a personal service but more emotional labour demanded for profitability. This is directly applicable to social work in which employees are struggling with ever-increasing workloads, and their resilience to continue performing emotional labour buckles under the pressure. Whilst the participants of this study perceived themselves as well-equipped to perform emotional labour it is pertinent to heed Masten’s warning that “no human being is invulnerable” (2001, p.235).

Workload had a negative impact on resilience in a number of respects and is a significant issue that needs to be addressed. Self-awareness of professional limitations enhances resilience (Wendt et al., 2011) but if this is in opposition to the expectations of the organisation, it is unlikely to be of benefit. Goleman maintains that ‘when there is a glaring gap between the espoused vision of an organisation and the actual reality, the inevitable emotional fallout can range from self-protective cynicism to anger and even despair’ (1998, p.281). High expectations from the organisation gave rise to feelings of incompetence and inadequacy among the participants of this study. They were either doing significantly more hours than they were contracted to do or attempting to maintain their own wellbeing by working only their contracted hours but then dealing with the stressors of falling behind in their work. Heavy workloads leave little time for emotional support, professional development, reflective practice and a healthy work/life balance, which are all linked to resilience. This is survival; paddling frantically to stay afloat. Attempts to thrive in this environment are unlikely to be successful.

While the pressures of workload are difficult to address in a climate of increased demand for service alongside decreased funding and resources, the findings from this study highlight how damaging the effects are to the resilience of social workers. Decreased resilience leads to increased stress and higher sickness absence. Working in preventative ways, including managing individual worker’s caseloads according to their personal capacity, could contribute towards more stable teams that do not lose efficiency through staff absence. Thus,

continuing to allocate more cases than individual workers can manage, is counter-productive both to employee wellbeing and to the overall quality and efficiency of the service provided.

“Bouncing back” implies recovery but conditions need to be present for recovery to take place. If organisational factors cause ongoing stress and inhibit resilience-enhancing processes, there will be little opportunity to recover from the inherent demands of the role. McAllister and McKinnon (2009) suggest that resilience can be enhanced by cognitive-behavioral intervention which encourages positive appraisal however there is a fine line between positive appraisal and uncritical acceptance. It seems unlikely that social workers will bounce back by positively appraising unrealistic and demanding work environments. If they are expected to be resilient to all demands, resilience becomes “a stick to beat social workers with” (Taylor, 2016, online).

While organisational support appears to be crucial, autonomy was also felt by the participants to promote resilience. The optimum level of autonomy is likely to differ depending on work experience. The experienced workers thought that micro-management undermined their resilience and instead they sought empowerment in their role. Empowerment of workers has been linked to greater resilience by encouraging feelings of self-efficacy (Howe, 2008) and positive self-identity (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Conversely, newly qualified social workers looked for direction and guidance from managers. This seems logical considering that resilience can develop over time as new situations are encountered and used as a learning process (Carver et al., 1989). Ironically, the newly qualified workers were less likely to ask for help or assert boundaries about their workload as they felt the pressure to prove their competence at this early stage of their career. Pro-active support is therefore essential to enable newly qualified workers to gradually develop confidence and become resilient practitioners over time.

Research on resilience has tended to move away from notions of inherently resilient individuals, to a dynamic process influenced by the social context. Those participants who thought that resilience was to some extent an innate capacity, also thought that alongside this it could be developed through a process of growth and learning. The potential for resilience to be learnt is important in its implications for enhancing the resilience of social workers. Factors associated with resilience, such as emotional intelligence and reflective ability, could be developed through formal training. This dynamic conceptualisation of resilience has an important impact, too, on the argument for it to be assessed when recruiting onto social work

degree courses and qualified posts. The researchers who make reference to this (Collins, 2008; Kinman & Grant, 2011) highlight the potential discrimination to individuals who may not inherently be particularly resilient but could develop this capacity over time with appropriate training and support.

In summary, the emotional resilience of social workers was found to be about surviving and coping with stress. Thriving was not part of the conceptual framework of a group of professionals who had come to accept the multiple pressures of their role in a culture that regarded stress as a norm. While the emotional demands of working with service users were significant, they were felt to be an inherent part of the role and in many cases the interpersonal element of the work provided the greatest degree of job satisfaction. Some aspects of the organisational culture were perceived to undermine resilience by placing unrealistic demands on workers to manage heavy caseloads and creating conflict between workers' professional values and organisational expectations.

Limitations

This was a small study of 13 participants and the findings are not generalisable, however they may be applicable to similar cases and raise relevant topics for discussion among other social workers. The participants were from one local authority only and thus comparisons could not be made with the culture and practices of other authorities. The size of this study and lack of diversity does not allow for meaningful consideration of the influences of such factors as gender and ethnicity on emotional resilience. The fact that participants were self-selecting may have introduced some bias, with only those interested in the subject offering to take part. However, self-selection does not logically lead to any particular interpretation or experience of resilience and does not therefore jeopardise the breadth of data gathered.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the multiple challenges to personal resilience that the social workers interviewed encounter in their day to day working lives. If stressful circumstances prevail, resilience will be constantly under threat and thriving will be a distant prospect. To enable social workers to thrive in their role, factors that undermine resilience must firstly be

addressed for mere survival. The concept of resilience then needs to be reframed as positive adaptation to the inherent, and accepted, challenges of working with service-users.

Organisations and teams play a key role in reframing resilience. Factors that have come to be seen as innate to the culture of social work need to be addressed including heavy caseloads, unrealistic demands and case management-orientated supervision. Instead, a culture should be nurtured in which acknowledging limitations and asking for support is regarded as professionalism. It is important to make space in supervision for emotional support and to consider offering external supervision, which focuses exclusively on the individual worker's emotional needs. Structured opportunities for professional development, peer discussion and reflection on practice, which heavy workloads often prevent, would allow for greater self-awareness leading to increased resilience. A workplace culture and environment that enables peer relationships to flourish, would enhance resilience by increasing informal opportunities for support and reflection. This can be achieved through simple measures such as social events and celebration of birthdays, that have the additional benefit of communicating to workers that they are valued. The empowerment of social workers could be developed by genuine, rather than tokenistic, consultation on policy and practice issues. In recognition of the fact that resilience develops with experience, proactive support should be offered to newly qualified workers who may have particular difficulty asking for it.

Despite the limitations acknowledged, and the over-arching issue of budget cuts which cannot be addressed at the team or organisational level, it is hoped that some of the ideas of the social workers interviewed could be used as a basis for discussion in individual social work teams about how to enhance resilience. If sufficient attention is paid both to factors of adversity and positive adaptation, not only will the workforce enjoy a greater sense of wellbeing, they will be able to provide consistently high-quality services to those in our communities who use them.

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